

Book Review

Dan Sprod, *Leichhardt's Expeditioners: in the Australian Wilderness 1844–1845*, Sandy Bay: Blubber Head Press, 2006 (x, 138, hardback). RRP \$50.00.

As founder of Blubber Head Press, and as an author in his own right, Dan Sprod has made a major contribution to Tasmanian and Australian history. His own books show a preference for larger-than-life characters who did extraordinary things: Alexander Pearce, Edward Tregurtha, and Jorgen Jorgenson, to name a few. Sprod has also written an admirable book on the German scientist and explorer Ludwig Leichhardt called *Proud Intrepid Heart: Leichhardt's First Attempt to the Swan River, 1846–1847* (1989). In his new book, published in a limited edition of 750 copies, Sprod deals with Leichhardt's first successful expedition which left from Sydney on 1 October 1844 for Moreton Bay, the Darling Downs and ending with the garrison of Victoria Settlement, Port Essington, now part of the Northern Territory. The journey of about 3,000 miles from the Darling Downs to Victoria Settlement, took Leichhardt's party a long fourteen-and-a-half months, ending on 17 December 1845. The soldiers at Victoria Settlement were astonished to find that the men had not perished in the wilderness.

Using his field journal, Leichhardt published his own account of the journey in 1847. Another expeditioner, John Gilbert, kept a journal of the first eight months of the journey, which was not published. Sprod draws on the journals of Leichhardt and Gilbert in *Leichhardt's Expeditioners*. It also reproduces, for the first time the full text of journals kept by two of Leichhardt's companions, John Murphy and William Phillips. Both journals are held in the Mitchell Library. John Murphy was by a young lad whose family Leichhardt had befriended on his sea voyage to Australia in 1841. Murphy had artistic talent and, by sketching the progress of the expedition, Leichhardt thought he would be a useful member of the party. Murphy's sketches are included in this book. Murphy's journal deals with the first six months of the party's travels and some scholars believe that Murphy copied entries from Gilbert's journal. Sprod assesses the evidence and finds that it is inadequate to support the view that Murphy's journal was an adaptation of Gilbert's. While there are 'insignificant' similarities, Murphy provided 'many original observations'.

William Phillips, a solicitor who had been convicted of forgery in London, claimed to have joined the party 'from a habitual love of enterprise and adventure', but in reality joined in the hope of receiving a pardon. He might well not have joined at all if he had known how long the journey would take. His animosity towards Leichhardt comes through in his journal. It appears that Phillips did not compile field notes and wrote his journal some years after the expedition, and certainly after Leichhardt's disappearance and death in 1848. Exposing Phillips' journal to close scrutiny, Sprod disagrees with those scholars who believe it was a fabrication. Noting the existence of 'many original facts' and certain textual differences, he believes that the journal was based on Phillips' own observations, not those of Leichhardt's. Whatever the case, this journal is better written and easier to read than Murphy's. Sprod assesses the value of each journal and writes a commentary to introduce each one. He ends the book with chapters on the expeditioners' relations with Aborigines (more could perhaps have been made of this topic) and the relations between the expeditioners themselves. The latter chapter assesses the contribution of each member of the party to the success of the expedition, how Leichhardt reacted to his charges and how well Leichhardt led the expedition.

The journals reveal the arduous nature of the journey: sleeping rough in difficult weather, spending valuable time in rounding up their horses and bullocks before beginning the next leg, struggling through often rugged bush, especially brigalow scrub,

and down dangerous escarpments, encountering Aborigines and not knowing whether they would be hostile or friendly, and often desperately short of food and water, this was an exhausting and stressful episode for men with little experience or talent for exploring the unknown. Although Murphy and Phillips provide passable descriptions of the landscape and sometimes the geology, their repeated descriptions of the killing of native birds and animals was riveting. Ducks, pigeons, flying foxes, emus, kangaroo rats, kangaroos, and more, were killed with no sense of remorse and recorded in a matter-of-fact way, reinforcing the injunction in Genesis that man had dominion over other creatures and could kill at will. For example, Phillips records the shooting of 50 ducks on at least two occasions. On another occasion he noted that Leichhardt determined to have 'a good blow-out' of flying foxes and killed over 55 of them. Murphy recorded the killing of a huge kangaroo 7 feet 9 inches in height with a tail 3 feet 9 inches long, with a circumference of 15 inches. Although he admired the hawk as 'the finest bird of prey he ever saw', Murphy had no qualms about killing one. The party also ate their own bullocks and wild buffaloes. Worse than lack of food was lack of water, which caused Phillips' tongue to swell out of his mouth and turn 'completely black'.

Although Leichhardt seems to have found Murphy's insolence increasingly hard to take, Murphy makes fewer criticisms of him than did Phillips, who thought the expedition unnecessarily delayed by the leader's dithering. When food was short, Leichhardt ordered his men to eat 'putrid' emu meat, which Phillips claimed 'nearly killed two of us by producing violent vomiting and excruciating pains in the stomach'. After his men suffered a second bout of illness Leichhardt finally relented and gave the emu meat to the dog. Earlier Leichhardt cut up the body of a dead horse. Phillips, sarcastically referring to his leader's 'usual attention to economy', considered it fortunate that the rider had not died 'as there is little doubt but the poor fellow would have been converted into food'.

Both journals provide useful descriptions of encounters with Aborigines. Despite the failure to understand each other, usually these encounters were friendly if noisy. Often the Aborigines would run away and watch from a distance, rather than confront the party. Phillips agreed with Murphy that the Aborigines were 'frightened at our cattle and horses'. Gifts were sometimes exchanged. Sometimes the two Aborigines on the party, Harry Brown and Charley Fisher, would mediate, but nearly always the gesticulations of the Aborigines showed that they wished Leichhardt's party to move on. Charley's 'great sense of locality' proved helpful, but when he fell out with Leichhardt and hit him twice in the face, Leichhardt ordered him out of the camp. Brown followed him but, after growing 'tired of bushing it', both soon returned. Charley also blamed other Aborigines for spearing a horse, but the injuries seemed caused by his tomahawk. The journals also describe Aboriginal camps and practices (men from one tribe seemed to have been circumcised) and generally paint the tribes met along the way in favourable terms. Phillips described one group as 'beyond comparison the finest set of Aborigines we have yet seen' and Leichhardt named one creek Kooembong, the Aboriginal word for moonlight. Phillips even showed understanding for an incident that occurred on the night of 28 June 1845 when, in the absence of a night watch, Aborigines attacked and killed Gilbert. Phillips accused Charley and Harry of interfering with one of the women of the tribe and described the attack as a 'natural retaliation' for the 'insult'.

The helpfully annotated text is enhanced by well-chosen photographs and a good index. The whole enterprise demonstrates, once again, the careful scholarship for which Dan Sprod is renowned. Anyone interested in the exploration of early Australia, and Aboriginal history, cannot fail to benefit from reading this book.

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